

From 'Bad' to 'Mad': Labelling and Behaviour in Peter Shaffer's *Equus*

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Abstract: The process of 'labelling' (whereby labels are socially imposed on a given behaviour by a given person) is an extensive and recurrent one in our society, as proved by the labelling of behaviours and people even into the literary text. In our analysis, we will try to show how applying one of two most different labels (psychopathic or psychotic) greatly influences our understanding of the existence of 'evil' or moral responsibility in the deeds of a person. To such end, we will use Peter Shaffer's play *Equus* (1973), which requires both the characters in the play and the spectators to decide whether Alan Strang's terrible crime is a result of evil or of insane behaviour: whether he is 'mad' or simply 'bad'. We will try to evince the current social and cultural confusion between madness and evil, and how processes of medicalization or criminalization affect our understanding of those around us and those living in the books we read.

Key Words: Shaffer, Evil, Madness, Psychiatry, Theatre, Sociopathy, Psychopathy, Violence, Theatre, society.

When first staged, *Equus* (1973) by Peter Shaffer provoked heated reactions not only in literary and dramatic circles, but also in the psychiatric community that the play both presents and questions. Much of the interest, comments and controversies raised by the play are focused on the blurred frontiers it proposes between sanity and madness, between mad and evil behaviour. Considered to be an apology of violence by some, the spectator is never completely assured of what the reasons behind Alan Strang's violent act are (if there are any). Also, the representation of violence is offered to the spectator directly, what produces a non-mediated cathartic and visceral reaction, which would be somehow diluted in a written, not staged, work.

In the stage (which is, alternatively, a boxing room, an operating room, a court, and an altar), two opposite views are presented: to some, Alan is deeply disturbed and in need of a 'cure' (the view fostered by Alan's psychiatrist, Martin Dysart and his colleague, Hesther Salomon). To others, his cruel act can only be explained by an evil personality (as argued by Harry Dalton, the stable owner, and the bench of lawyers judging the case). Shaffer himself, in the prologue to *Equus*, makes reference to the real-life incident that inspired the work, committed by "a highly disturbed young man" and lacking "any coherent explanation"¹

The play becomes an argument around the ulterior motives (or lack of) of Alan Strang: is he evil or mad? Is he affected by a psychotic disorder or plainly sociopathic? In the following pages, we will try to delimitate psychosis and psychopathy, analysing the processes at work in society for labelling or mislabelling these different behaviours and the way they are reflected in literature, specifically in *Equus*.

Penning from *Hamlet*, if Alan's be madness there is certainly no method to it. The criminal act itself (the blinding of the horses) is markedly violent, due to the built tension of the play, and Alan's behaviour is deeply tainted with aggressiveness, hence the pathology in the case. For those arguing for the 'insanity' of his behaviour, the boy has been diagnosed (both inside and outside the dramatic world of the play) as a schizophrenic. Serious misconceptions of what schizophrenia is (as we will analyse later) are deeply rooted in the social unconscious: this archetypal form of insanity, however, does not imply a sort of Jekyll and Hide 'split' personality. It is, rather, the contrary to a split: fantasy and reality are seen as one, and events happening in the fantasy world of the mind are treated as though they were taking place in the real world. The schizophrenic does not 'become' nor is 'taken over' by someone else, but rather is always insecure about who s/he is, because of his/her inability to discriminate fantasy and reality. Schizophrenics are not 'possessed' by an alternate personality that makes them act violently, another common misconception that is related to a social construct of schizophrenia, and while some do commit violent acts (in a much less significant statistical probability than is usually thought), most spurts of violence by alleged schizophrenics are, in fact, produced by individuals with sociopathic or psychopathic tendencies who are taken to be, or pretend to be, mad. People diagnosed with schizophrenia are more likely to hurt themselves or those immediately around them (close family) than to tend to outbursts of uncontrollable violence and anger.

In this sense, Alan's attitude and behaviour is presented at times to be tainted with marked sociopathic hues, since the horses he blinds represent society at large (the actors in the chorus appear, alternatively, as the horses, as main characters in the play, and as a social force and crowd which is never fully identified).² Faced with the appalling and apparently senseless violence of the deed, societal forces at large plunge into a search for reasons: many critics have seen *Equus* as a 'whodunit' with a psychiatric background, as a detective story not in the sense of finding out who the criminal is, but of clarifying what the reasons behind the crime could be, an interpretation where the *raison d'être* of the staging would be to find out what could be the reasoning (or lack of) in an apparently normal adolescent's mind who brutally blinds innocent animals. This reduction of *Equus* to a whodunit is, clearly, a very simplistic one that ignores many other aspects at work within the play (the opposition

between reason and passion, the consequences of desperate religiousness, the conflicts of adolescence and the contradictions in familiar upbringing, to name but a few), but it does emphasize the point we intend to make: Alan Strang could not be considered to be an 'evil' person, but he is, rather, deeply psychologically disturbed due to a series of societal pressures that have eroded his possibilities for normal development during his childhood and adolescence.

According to Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing, the "vocabulary of denigration" at work in the diagnosis or 'labelling' of schizophrenia implies the existence of "a certain standard way of being human to which the psychotic cannot measure up", the result of "efforts to avoid thinking in terms of freedom, choice, responsibility".³ Labelling as a theory was introduced by a group of sociologists (Howard Becker, John Kitsuse and Kai Erikson) in the 60s (roughly the same decade when Laing's theories about the schizophrenic division of the self were first presented). To this group, deviance is a process of symbolic interaction, i.e., a person being labelled requires the existence of a labeller. The interaction between both (labelled and labeller) would be ruled by their interpretation of the other's actions and reactions. We find this theory to be most pertinent in our analysis of *Equus*, since the mere exercise of labelling Alan Strang a psychotic or a psychopath deeply influences the way his actions are analysed. Furthermore, "once people are labelled deviant, they tend to see themselves as deviant, which in turn leads them to continue the so-called deviant behaviour".⁴ Labelling, in all its forms, would always be applied by the majority, i.e. by society itself: Alan's clearly deviant behaviour is explained in some parts of *Equus* as a result of a revenge on the institutions that are at the basis of society, such as family or religion, understanding said institutions as fictive constructs which are created to direct and monitor the individual. Shaffer reflects on how the strains of education affect individuals, specifically in families such as Alan's, a teenager and only child undergoing "the torment of adolescence" and embarked in the definition of his self and identity.⁵

The cruel torture act towards the horses unveils the contradictions and fissures that are at work in Alan's mind, as well as the reality of his family and the contradictory communicative modes and manipulations that have been placed on Alan during his development. The idea of the family as an entity where the members should be co-ordinated for the correct development of the individual is one that seems to haunt Shaffer: *Five Finger Exercise* (1958) likens a family to the fingers in a pianist's hand, which have to be perfectly in tune so as to play successfully. As opposed to this tuning, Alan has been manipulated by his parents, who have been sending contradictory messages in terms of religion, politics, and morality, while also reinforcing Alan's desperate religiosity. Alan becomes the battleground where the fights of their incompatible parents

are staged, as both Dora and Frank Strang fight to control Alan's self and try to make him approve their own vision of the world, to affirm their position versus the other. Marriage is, for Shaffer, a social institution that allows no questioning, a hypocritical agreement by which only society as an institution is satisfied, and which does not lead to a balanced education of the children: "A box of boredom for man and wife – a torture chamber for the children . . . a miserable little group marked off by a flat door, or a garden fence".⁶

Since it would be unfair for Shaffer to put the blame for the crime on family alone, it must be noticed that the family is seen as a microcosm reflecting the larger societal pressures on the individual. Television is one of the means Alan uses, through the endless repetition of jingles and commercials, to denounce the manipulation he's being subjected to, and to emphasize how the experiences that enable individual development are channelled by mass media towards manipulated stereotypes, as seen in Act I, scene iii. Identity is a social construction, a failed one in this case, just as evil seems to be presented as socially constructed. Laing describes, in *The Divided Self*, the evolution from a:

good, normal, healthy child . . . to be *bad*, to do or say things that . . . [caused] great distress and which . . . [are] on the whole 'put down' to naughtiness or badness until . . . [it goes] beyond all tolerable limits so that . . . [the person can] only be regarded as completely *mad*".⁷

This formulation, which has become a classic one in the shape of the 'from bad to mad' formula, marks the confusion at work in society's collective mind between schizophrenia and personality disorder, where the only way to cope with an appalling crime is to attribute it to some non-understandable force, to pure madness, instead of pure evil. Dalton, the stable owner in *Equus*, considers that Alan was, at first "bloody good. He'd spend hours with the horses cleaning and grooming them, way over the call of duty. I thought he was a real find". Only after the blinding has taken place he realizes he "had been hiring a loony".⁸

The idea that madness might be a physical illness requiring medical treatment started at the beginning of the 17th c., when aristocratic families started to pack up embarrassing, crazy relatives, sending them to private madhouses that took prisons as a model of surveillance and control of difference as analysed by Michel Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic*, *Discipline and Punish*, *Madness and Civilization* and *Mental Illness and Psychology*.

In general terms, it is by no means exaggerated to say that our culture associates madness with evil, and that the boundaries between character defect (psychopathy, sociopathy) and psychiatric illness are

more blurred now than ever. There is a confusion in the mind of the average individual between schizophrenia and personality disorders, between people who have mental problems and those who are antisocial or immature.⁹ This confusion is the result of a long and intricate process of medicalization and criminalization, and it is, in part, the result of a confusion whereby notorious (and not necessarily mentally ill) criminals are sent to psychiatric hospital or units, instead of being sent to plain prisons. Contrarily, Alan Strang was going to be sent to prison, as Hesther informs the spectators: "My bench wanted to send the boy to prison. For life, if they could manage it. It took me two hours solid arguing to get him sent to you [psychiatrist Martin Dysart] instead."¹⁰ In the common imagination, the frontier between medical care and penitentiary confinement is not quite clear. In the United Kingdom, some controversial sections of the 1983 Mental Health Act allow courts to send some kind of deviant social misfits (such as sex offenders or arsonists) to psychiatric hospitals. Furthermore, psychologists and psychiatrists in said hospitals use medical models to deal with such offenders, so the identification between 'mad' and 'bad' is perpetuated.

There are some other reasons for society at large to identify madness and badness: the media often use the term 'psychopath' and 'psychotic' as if they were interchangeable. While the term 'psychopath' is clearly falling into disuse (precisely because of its confusion with terms such as 'psychosis'), many deeds committed by psychopathic individuals tend to be termed 'psychotic', thus extending the identification between both terms. To further complicate things, psychopathic criminals, who tend to be extremely cunning, manipulative and clear-thinking, often simulate psychotic symptoms to achieve lenient charges and to satisfy their mendacity by deceiving both courts and psychiatrists alike. Well-known offenders have claimed to suffer symptoms commonly associated with schizophrenia (hearing voices, multiple personalities) and have often been successful in conning doctors and juries to receive mental health care: in fact, many text-books on criminology still consider David Berkowitz, the infamous Son of Sam (agreed to be a *sane* sociopath and serial killer), to be a clear example of schizophrenia.

These examples should account for the common tendency to consider anyone whose behaviour is seen as amoral, dangerous or outrageous as 'mad'. Human mind and society finds something comforting in the fact that a serious criminal offence, a murder or any brutal act, has been produced under the influence of a psychosis, rather than acknowledging the fact that *sane* people who would not be given a psychiatric diagnose may act so brutally. While the personality of the psychopath or sociopath is clearly abnormal and may be related to a defect in character, this does not imply the existence of any mental illness. The 'medicalization' of clearly selfish or anti-social behaviours is reinforcing

the identification between dangerous individuals and mental patients. Many are convinced that serial killers, terrorists, or even child-molesters must be mentally ill to do what they do. In the words of Muijen, "An ominous process is developing in many people's minds, linking evil and mental illness".¹¹ The automatic connection between violence and mental illness is thus bolstered.

We could say that punishment in our society is based on the belief that, in order for an act of violence or cruelty to be considered a crime, it must be committed by someone who has freely chosen to act that way: punishment, therefore, presupposes rationality, sanity, and freedom of choice. To further complicate the identification between madness and badness, the treatment of both in western civilization has been virtually the same. In Laingian terms, madness is often interpreted as another form of disobedience or disregard for the norms, as is badness: therefore, society has often tended to consider that both deviances can be treated through similar punitive systems. While the idea of what is criminal but sane and what is insane behaviour seems to be clear in legal texts, from the Durham Rule ("An accused is not criminally responsible if his unlawful act was the product of mental disease or defect", Durham vs. US 1954) to the Insanity Defence Reform Act [US 1984], whereby a person charged with a criminal offence should be found not guilty by reason of insanity if it is shown that, as a result of a mental disease or retardation, he was unable to appreciate the wrongfulness of his conduct at the time of his offence, the pretence of madness on the part of some notorious criminals have caused a general distrust of the badness/madness distinction. On the other hand, while the definition of madness is complicated by the unfathomability of the brain and the little knowledge we still have of mental processes; badness, even if not formally diagnosed, can be recognized when we see it. As expressed by Satel, "one of the hallmarks of badness (or evil, as some might call it) is the lack of ambivalence that the perpetrators feel towards their actions".¹² This is clearly not the case in *Equus*, where the plot slowly unveils the many contradictory feelings Alan places on the horses he blinds: fear, awe, submission, or hate, and the corresponding ambivalence in his perception of what he has done. "Dangerous and Severe Personality Disorder" (DSPD), also called "Antisocial Personality" in DSM-IV (a wide term that would include both sociopathy and psychopathy) makes reference to a sane, but amoral and selfish person who has no conscience or feelings for others, and who is likely to disrespect and violate norms with no feelings of regret or guilt for such actions.¹³ If we take paedophilia as an example (a criminal, deviant behaviour which has often been considered by most of society to be the result of a 'mad' or 'sick' behaviour), we can say that, even if there is a disorder in their sexual orientation, the paedophiles do have moral choices available, which in this case would include inhibition of sexual practice

and not coercing others into said type of sex. Sexual orientations, deviant as they may be, are not illnesses per se, since their negative or deviant results can be morally questioned and avoided by the individual before the sexual act takes place. As far as Personality Disorders are concerned, some authors such as Linda Steele have expressed doubts that they can be 'cured': personality grows over the length of one's life and could not, therefore, be 'treated' by psychiatrists. These authors point at the failure of the 'medical' paradigm for the treatment of sociopaths and psychopaths, and emphasize that the misrepresentation of criminality as mental illness does not stress the idea of moral responsibility.

Individuals diagnosed as suffering "antisocial personality disorder" tend to be apparently well adjusted in society, often charming and intelligent. These apparently positive qualities are combined with a tendency towards cunningness and manipulation, insincerity and lack of remorse, and a certain emotional shallowness reflected in their lack of empathy and in a different threshold for fear and anxiety, higher than the average individual. Though they often despise social order and their peers, the sociopaths are able to function perfectly within the society they despise, simulating a perfect adaptation to their surroundings. Sociopaths and psychopaths do not lose touch with reality (although they often have feelings of superiority) and very rarely suffer anguish or distress. The mentally ill, on the contrary, tend to withdraw socially and to avoid interaction with others, because of their inability to inscribe themselves in reality and to clearly set the difference between reality and fantasy: the psychopath is inscribed in reality while the psychotic is very loosely connected to the real world. The psychotic also usually share mainstream social values, and thus are deeply disturbed and distressed whenever they break social expectations or norms: in this sense, Alan in *Equus* is deeply worried whenever he strays from what he has been taught by his parents (when he is caught at a pornographic movie house, for example), and is horrified when he remembers, through a faked session of hypnosis, what happened at the stable. Alan's horrible crime is not the result of disregard for social norms, but rather the expression of a deeply disturbed introjection of social norms, produced by a convoluted development as an individual.

The subject for this paper sprouts from the deep confusion in society's collective mind of what is bad and what is mad, with the expectable result that evil or badness tends to be devoid of its moral component and 'excused' as madness and irrationality. Our analysis of the forces at work in *Equus* should be considered within an expected continuum of research that tries to delimitate what is evil and what is insanity in literature. Literary works and films are a reliable reflection of most general assumptions of society: in this sense, during the last 20 years, readers and spectators seem to have been obsessed with works that

portray antisocial criminal behaviours identified as insane or which at least do not establish a clear differentiation between evil and insanity (the almost archetypal Hannibal Lecter created by Thomas Harris in *The Silence of the Lambs* would be a clear example of this tendency: when asked what is wrong with him, most people answer he is suffering some mental disorder, and many identify him as a 'schizophrenic'). While some literary works, such as *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess, or *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, clearly show the consequences of evil antisocial behaviour without establishing any link to mental disorders, it is most interesting to analyse the reader's reactions towards some other works or films where psychopaths are equated with psychotics. In the long run, we attempt to try and detect a pattern in the literary representation of evil and its association with (or dissociation from) madness. *Equus* is a pioneer, in this sense, in the exploration of the modern obsession with 'evil madmen' and in its restless exploration of what the borders of insanity and evil are.

Notes

1. Peter Shaffer, *Equus*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 8.
2. Sydney Lumet's 1977 adaptation employs real horses instead of actors disguised as such: as a result, much of the strength of the implication in the society-horses equation is lost.
3. Ronald David Laing, *The Divided Self: an Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 27.
4. Alex Thio, *Deviant Behaviour* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 56.
5. Barry Pree, "Peter Shaffer Interviewed by Barry Pree," *Transatlantic Review* 14 (1963): 92.
6. Peter Shaffer, *Shrivings: a Play in Three Acts*. (London: Deutsch, 1974), 147.
7. Laing, 181.
8. Peter Shaffer, *Equus*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 47.
9. J. Leff, "Why is Care in the Community Perceived as a Failure?," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 179 (2001): 381.
10. Shaffer, 19.
11. M. Muijen, "Everyone's Favourite Scapegoat," *Health Service Journal* 12 (1996): 16.
12. Sally Satel, "Perspective on Hate; Badness or Madness? Furrow Sought Help For What He Saw As His Mental Illness. We Don't Know If He Was Delusional Or Evil," *The Los Angeles Times*, 15 August 1999, p. 5.
13. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published

by the American Psychiatric Association, is the handbook used most often in diagnosing mental disorders in the United States. While widely accepted among psychologists and psychiatrists, the manual has proved controversial in its listing of certain characteristics as mental disorders, the most notorious example being the listing in the DSM-II of homosexuality as a mental disorder; a classification that was removed by vote of the APA in 1973. In 2000 the American Psychiatric Association revised the text of DSM-IV to include new research information that had been developed since first publication in 1994. This text revision (TR) included a very few changes in the criteria, designed mainly to correct what were perceived as errors in the original text.

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